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The Role of Empathy in the Service Experience

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examines the role of empathy in the student service experience. Taking a dyadic perspective, both students and staff's perceptions are analyzed to determine if 1) empathy matters to both actors alike; and 2) which differences in perceptions about the role of empathy between these actors exist.

Design/Methodology/Approach: We adopt a multi-method approach and used data from 256 usable survey responses from eleven higher education service providers in Singapore. Empathy was operationalized by six cognitive and affective independent variables and multiple multivariate analyses are applied, such as multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), discriminant analysis and multiple regression analysis.

Results: Results show that both students and staff alike evaluate empathy as important in the co-created service experience. The provision of individualized attention to students to positively influence student experience in learning was deemed important by both staff and students. Yet, there are also distinct differences. For students, it is essential that staff members have students' best interests at heart; for staff members, knowledge of students' needs and show of care and concern are important.

Practical Implications: Students and staff perceive empathy in higher education service provision differently. Interestingly, whilst staff think, caring for students is important, students feel that too much care and concern from staff has a negative effect on their experience. Hence, too much care and concern might cause potential issues with the student's perception of 'over-servicing' which might manifest as 'spoon-feeding'. Instead, students are asking for individualized and professionalized attention, to be taken seriously and to be involved in the co-creation of the education service experience.

Originality/Value: This study advances the understanding of affective and cognitive aspects of empathy and their influence on students' service experiences.

Keywords: Service experience, empathy, service-dominant logic, co-creation, higher education

Introduction

Empathy is the key driver to achieve a high quality customer experience in service settings (Parasumaran *et al.*, 1994). As a psycho-social concept, empathy is defined as the response to and the ability to feel what others are feeling (Singer and Lamm, 2009). Empathy includes both cognitive and affective components: cognitive factors relate to a person's thought process to understand the emotions of others, while the affective component refers an individual's ability to feel what others are feeling without relating this feeling to others and not oneself (Decety and Lamm, 2006).

Individuals vary in their levels of empathy. Variations are attributed to both environmental-contextual and genetic origins (Knafo *et al.*, 2018). This paper focusses on contributing to a deeper understanding of the environmental-contextual, hence socio-relational, factors of empathy in the higher education service settings. It is known that individual levels of empathy are influenced by a number of factors, including contextual appraisal, changes of empathy over time, and the quality and type of relationships between individuals (Singer and Lamm, 2009).

Although empathy is integral in human interaction (Wieseke *et al.*, 2012), the role of empathy has not been specified sufficiently for the higher education service context. Existential studies involving empathy in the higher education service sector are predominantly focused on the measurement of empathy within a larger scale for the measurement of service quality with a quality assurance perspective, and not specific to the study of empathy (Abili *et al.*, 2012; Galeeva, 2016; Umasuthan *et al.*, 2017). Important aspects of the dyad relationship between student and staff have not been examined and discussed. For example, it is unclear if empathy is equally important to both students and staff in relation to the student service experience. The discussion in this paper argues that a deeper understanding of empathy in the higher education services sector is necessary for three major reasons: 1) the uniqueness

of the higher education service context, 2) the marketization of the higher education sector; and 3) the psycho-social argument that empathy is key to student learning.

First, knowledge about the role of empathy and its need in the higher education services sector is essential. Questions concerning the relevance, extent and expectation of empathy in the education service experience arise in view of the uniqueness of higher education as a unique service experience which requires students—as customers—to meet stringent academic and personal criteria in order to be admitted into the experience (Rowley, 1997). Following Service-Dominant Logic, higher education service providers, alongside students, can also be seen as co-creators of value by means of the student experience in learning (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012; Grönroos, 2008; Sim *et al.*, 2018) within which empathy manifests. However, due to the need for students to meet and abide by academic criteria, students may not necessarily be viewed solely as customers in the learning process and experience since students are also involved with staff—as education service providers—in the co-creation of the learning experience (Lomas, 2007; Ng and Forbes, 2009; Vargo and Lusch, 2008). Hence, in this service context, an increased understanding of various perspectives—both from students and staff—offering ideas and new insight on empathy and its influence on students' service experiences is necessary.

Second, understanding the role of empathy has become important as there potentially might be competing interest—between students and staff of higher education institutions—that arise as the higher education service environment is increasingly implicated in the global phenomenon of marketization, with growing semblance of service-orientation and commoditization of the higher education service (Hudson, 2016; Tan *et al.*, 2016). The assimilation of the higher education service sector into such global phenomenon is attributed to the acceptance of neo-liberal corporate, business and service-oriented ideas in the operations and management of higher education institutions; and also predominantly due to

the growing utilitarian and transactional views of education and learning among higher education service administrators (Akonkwa, 2009). At the same time, we understand that higher education as a service system is a value co-creation configuration of components such as people, technology, shared information and values (Maglio and Spohrer, 2008; Tommasetti *et al.*, 2017), with the fundamental role in providing quality student learning experiences—as value towards students—as the core mission (Yeo and Li, 2012). Hence, higher education service providers face a need to balance between the neo-liberal marketing intentions of providing an education service with the core mission of education (OECD, 2014). This balancing act brings forth the challenge of providing empathy to students since a service quality mindset is more associated with being empathetic; whereas the need to abide by traditional academic values and mission might be perceived as less empathy and hence less care and concern to students (Akonkwa, 2009).

Third, empathy is essential to learning, which is an important component in the student's education service experience (Jarvis, 2012; McAllister and Irvine, 2002). It is known that the student's learning experience is based on pro-social interactions relying on the relationship between student and staff (Edwards, 2001). Yet, the relationship between student and staff has been overlooked. So far, researchers have provided little evidence on the role of empathy, how it influences the student's learning process and how care and/or concern act as influencing intangible factors (McAllister and Irvine, 2002). As mentioned earlier, studies on higher education service have not focused on empathy alone, but rather within the SERVQUAL and larger service quality context. The study of empathy in the context of student learning is important because just as a service experience is emotional in nature and evokes affective responses (Chen and Chen, 2010; Umasuthan *et al.*, 2017), the student experience in learning possesses an emotional dimension as a result of the interactional relationship between student and staff (Edwards, 2001). The emotions that are generated through the interaction

between student and staff have influence on student motivation and academic performance (McAllister and Irvine, 2002).

Responding to calls for further research in enhancing the service experience (Ostrom *et al.*, 2015), this paper is organized as follows. First, we draw on literature from social psychology and neuroscience to discuss the state of research on empathy in the service literature. We also conceptualize the student service experience, which provides the conceptual basis for this research. Through the review of pertinent literature, we developed hypotheses and present a conceptual model depicting the relationship between empathy and student experience in learning. Empirical results derived from the survey research design approach are analyzed using a multi-method multivariate approach to understand the influence that empathy has in the student experience of learning, as well as to delineate the differences between students and staff of higher education service providers. Finally, this paper concludes with the implications of the empirical results for student experience theory and higher education service practice.

Empathy in Services Research

In the service literature, empathy is generally conceptualized and measured as a multidimensional construct within service quality, using measures from the SERVQUAL model (Galeeva, 2016; Parasumaran *et al.*, 1988; Umasuthan *et al.*, 2017). Empathy is the key to any positive relationship, serving as a mechanism to foster connectedness (Pavlovich and Krahne, 2012) and thus adding to the positive evaluation of service encounter experiences (Wieseke *et al.*, 2012). Education-specific scales for the measurement of service quality in higher education such as the HEDPERF and SERVPERF also include empathy as a component (Abdullah, 2005). Studies confirm that within the construct of ‘service quality’ empathy is one of the key influencing factors. A service provider’s high levels of empathy indicate care

and individualized attention towards customers, and hence a portrayal of service quality (Andreassen *et al.*, 2016; Buttle, 1996; Ladhari, 2009; Parasumaran *et al.*, 1988; Soutar and McNeil 1996; Umasuthan *et al.*, 2017; Yu and Sangiorgi, 2018). Most importantly, empathy is perceived and measured as a concept related to individuals.

Within service research, empathy is a crucial factor to achieve customer satisfaction. Employee's empathy reflects the level of care and individualized attention towards customers (Buttle, 1996; Ladhari, 2009; Parasumaran *et al.*, 1988; Soutar and McNeil, 1996). Within the context of service quality, researchers have predominantly focused on measuring levels of empathy perceived by customers and how these relate to the customer's assessment of the tangibles, reliability, responsiveness and levels of assurance they receive from the service provider. Recently, the importance of empathy has gained momentum in the academic literature, and is recognized as a key characteristic for employees in service design; here, empathy is essential to design user-centric workflows and employees need to adopt the customer's perspective and understand their feelings and needs (Andreassen *et al.*, 2016; Yu and Sangiorgi, 2018). Further, there is increased attention to understand empathy as a key contributor in enabling co-creation of experiences; for example, Zhang *et al.*, (2018, p. 65) posit to hire "employees with the appropriate set of traits that could foster politeness and empathy (such as people who score high on the agreeableness scale of the Big 5)."

Empathy research is routed in the social psychology and neuroscience research domains; recently, empathy has been discussed in the nexus of social-neuro science, connecting both the social and neuroscientific aspects (Chierchia and Singer, 2017; Decety and Ickes, 2011; Decety and Lamm, 2006). Empathy is defined as "two empathic sub-processes: sharing others' internal states and explicitly considering those states" (Zaki and Ochsner 2012, 675). Empathy is formed from both affective and cognitive aspects. The affective dimension relates to a person's prosocial, affective appraisal towards others; the

cognitive aspect refers to underlying thought processes leading to the ability to understand emotions of others (Decety and Lamm, 2006; Decety and Ickes, 2011). High levels of empathy are consequently the sum of understanding and feeling what others feel, and being able to differentiate that the feeling relates to others and not oneself (Decety and Lamm, 2006).

What is known from the field of neuroscience, is that during the process of feeling what another person is feeling, automatic changes in brain activity can be tracked; brain structures relating self- and other person's experiences are both activated. These same structures are also activated when the individual's experience these feelings themselves: "sharing the emotions of others activates neural structures, it is observed that the same structures are also active during the first-hand experience of that emotion" (Singer and Lamm, 2009, p. 81). These neuronal activities stimulate emotions and enable: (i) the individual's ability to mirror other people's emotional experiences, (ii) the ability of perspective taking, and (iii) the capacity to self-regulation of emotions (Decety and Lamm, 2009). A person's high levels of empathy, "share their feelings and emotions in the absence of any direct emotional stimulation to themselves. Human beings can feel empathy for other people in a wide variety of contexts: for basic emotions and sensations such as anger, fear, sadness, joy, pain and lust, as well as for more complex emotions such as guilt, embarrassment and love" (Singer, 2006, 857-858). In terms of functionality, empathy helps human beings to create affective bonds, to evoke altruistic behavior, and to refrain from doing harm to others (Singer, 2006).

Although this process and the definition of empathy on an individual level has been well explained, it is unclear how the level of empathy varies within different social contexts and there is limited knowledge about how empathy is perceived to contribute to the student service experience. For example, Singer and Lamm (2009) explain that a person's environment and the quality of social relationships shape individual empathy. Yet, open

questions remain around the influence of these relationships; and there is still debate whether empathy is rather the result of a person's stable personality trait or if it is rather the consequence of a behavior that is being shaped, trained and nurtured through the social environment. Further, only very limited research exists that offers a dyad view on empathy, considering and combining both the student's and the employee or education service provider's perspective.

Subsequently, the extant services research literature misses out on providing a deeper and nuanced understanding of these complexities of the role of empathy in the education services context. Yet, there is clearly a need for any service provider to convey to their customers that they do care and are attentive to each individual customer—similarly, it is clear that customers need to feel understood. In summary, a need arises for education service providers to understand the role of empathy as an essential part of the student service experiences as students want to feel unique and perceive their needs are appreciated and valued (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2009). For both teaching and administrative staff as service providers in higher education institutions, portraying empathy towards students involves sharing the perceived emotion in a way that the emotional conditions are congruent between the employees and students (Eisenberg and Strayer, 1990), so that actual and perceived customer emotions are matched. Teaching and administrative staff may perceive empathy towards students in the same way (Pitman, 2000). The resulting empathy is considered the essential service attribute that education service providers can portray to their students.

The Student Service Experience

The notion of the student service experience originates from combining the concepts of consumption experience (Lemke *et al.*, 2011) and service experience (Jaakkola *et al.*, 2015; Otto and Ritchie, 1995). While consumption experience refers to emotions and feelings

elicited during product or service consumption (Westbrook and Oliver, 1991), the service experience refers to the cognitive, affective and experiential elements during a service encounter—where the service provider and customer meet (Chen and Chen, 2010; Hui and Bateson, 1991; Otto and Ritchie, 1995). Within the student service experience is the critical concept of value that students increasingly demand (Woodall *et al.*, 2014).

Following the service-dominant logic, this value is co-created between key actors—both students and staff—within the higher education service through a co-created service experience (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Interactions between both key actors along key education service touchpoints results in a co-created service experience, whereby service is the exchange between parties (Vargo *et al.*, 2016). The extant literature has shown that often one single salient attribute of the entire learning experience at a University or Higher Education service provider is enough to form the student’s overall assessment of the service experience, which “tends to be holistic or gestalt rather than attribute-based, and the focus of evaluation is on self (internal) but not on service environment (external)” (Chen and Chen, 2010, p. 30). Hence, understanding the implication of value on the student service experience from the lens of service-dominant logic is essential to explaining how students think and behave (Woodall *et al.*, 2014).

The student service experience includes both affective and intellectual-cognitive dimensions (Krathwohl *et al.*, 1984; Magolda, 1987). Despite the increasing use of online and cloud learning in the higher education classroom, which seems to replace the need for face-to-face interaction between the student and lecturer, it can be argued that the traditional dyadic relationship between student and lecturer remains essential (McCulloch and Crook, 2008); especially, to stimulate and strengthen the student’s affective domain of the experience. Studies have shown that students still need a positive relationship with their educators, particularly, when it comes to motivation, and providing feedback (Dawson *et al.*, 2018). It is

known that the affective dimension of the student experience is becoming even more important, with the growing popularity of transformative learning (Taylor, 2017). For example, transformative learning requires the student to change perspective in learning, including the transformation of understanding the self, the transformation of own beliefs and conative elements that lead to behavioral changes, further the cognitive-affective dichotomy also is the foundation of (Gould, and Taylor, 2017).

This study considers empathy to be part of the affective dimension of the student service experience and is the focus of this research. Overall, affective components of service experience are typically hedonic in nature and include elements of fantasies, feeling and fun (Kao *et al.*, 2008; Otto and Ritchie, 1995). Affective elements, such as moods and emotions are attributed to both the consumption experience and the service encounter (de Rojas and Camarero, 2008)—in other words for the student, both the learning experience and the experience with educators and administrative staff matter for their evaluation of the service experience. To examine the role of empathy, we adopt a dyadic perspective to understand the student service experience. The dyadic perspective is to understand experiences and value creation in knowledge intensive services (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012). The student service experience is a service that is created as a collaborative process between the staff of the higher education provider and the student with the purpose to jointly co-created value (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012; Grönroos, 2008; Sim *et al.*, 2018). The dyadic relationship between the educator and the student can be considered as the service encounter (Chandon *et al.*, 1997).

The affective element of the service experience is one of the essential aspects of student service experience (Gould and Taylor, 2017). Yet, when compared to the intellectual-cognitive and conative-behavioral aspects of students learning, the value of affective elements to learning have traditionally been underestimated (Krathwohl, et al., 1984), Magolda, 1987).

More recently, researchers have re-stated the importance of the affective dimension as part of transformative learning (Taylor, 2017). Transformative learning requires a deeper understanding of the affective side of the learning experience because a change of perspective in learning comprises the transformation of understanding the self, the transformation of own beliefs that lead to behavioral changes (Taylor, 2017). Examples of practices to stimulate the affective domain of student's learning include, creating good relationships with faculty, promoting respect between university faculty and students, and establishing a stimulating classroom atmosphere (Magolda, 1987). Also, Mazer et al. (2007, p. 1) suggest that personal relationships between teaching staff and students matter most, and their study found that students "who accessed the Facebook website of a teacher high in self-disclosure anticipated higher levels of motivation and affective learning and a more positive classroom climate".

A synthesis of the extant literature shows that so far key elements of quality of experience that can be inferred to evaluate the student experience include 1) hedonics, 2) involvement, 3) stimulation, 4) uniqueness, 5) participation and 6) recognition (Chen and Chen, 2010; de Rojas and Camarero, 2008; Kao *et al.*, 2008; Lemke *et al.*, 2011; Ng and Forbes, 2009; Otto and Ritchie, 1996; Pitman *et al.*, 2010). 1) *Hedonic elements* are manifested through a sense of enjoyment that students encounter as a result of the higher education experience (de Rojas and Camarero, 2008; Kao *et al.*, 2008; Mano and Oliver, 1993; Otto and Ritchie, 1995). 2) *Student involvement* is necessary, due to the experiential nature of higher education, a feeling of being involved in the higher education process provides for a positive influence on experiential quality (Garrett, 1997; Kao *et al.*, 2008; Otto and Ritchie, 1995; Peterson and Miller, 2004). 3) The feeling of *stimulation* is enabled when students anticipate intellectual challenge during the higher education process (de Rojas and Camarero, 2008; Otto and Ritchie, 1995; Peterson and Miller, 2004). 4) The feeling of *uniqueness* stems from the novelty and an element of surprise perceived during active involvement and

participation in a learning experience (Garrett, 1997; Kao *et al.*, 2008; Otto and Ritchie, 1995). Finally, a sense of *active 5) participation* and 6) *recognition* results when students feel their best interests are being served and that the rewards are given are consistent with the effort they put in (Douglas *et al.*, 2006; Otto and Ritchie, 1995).

The problem, however, is the extant literature only explores direct relational aspects between students and staff members within the ‘service encounter’ of the student’s learning experiences. For example, there are few studies that are dedicated—though not necessarily directly—to understand the role of empathy in the education service (Douglas *et al.*, 2006; McAllister and Irvine, 2002; Ramsden, 1991; Yeo, 2008). In this paper, we argue that empathy is one of these missing aspects that is needed to fully understand the notion of the student experience.

Research Aim and Conceptual Model

Stemming from the above discussion, the aim of this research is to provide a deeper understanding on the role of empathy in the context of higher education services and contribute with answers the quest on how to better manage the student service experience. The key research question we examine in this paper is ‘how does empathy impact student experiences in learning?’ Based on our review of the literature, we form the following hypotheses:

H1: Empathy matters to both students and higher education staff members in terms of its influence on student experience in learning.

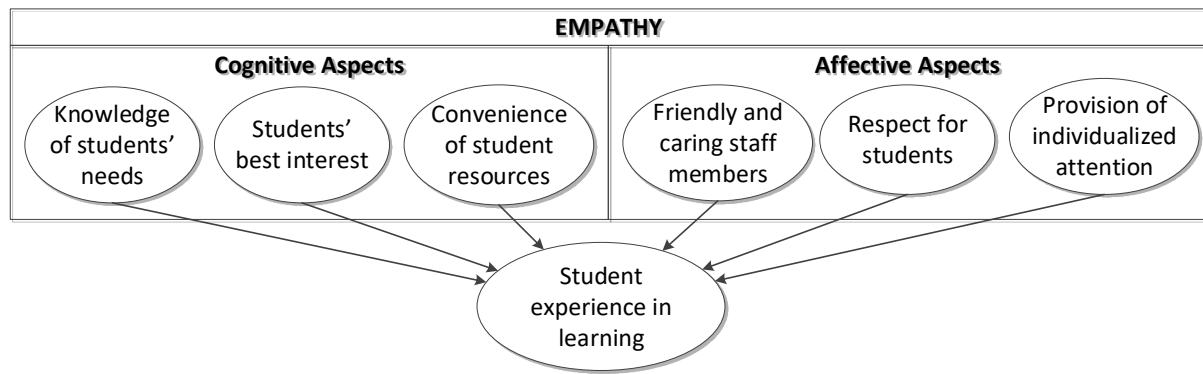
H2: There are similarities and differences in perceptions between students and staff members in relation to how empathy influences student experiences in learning.

H3: Teaching and non-teaching staff perceive the impact of empathy on student learning experiences in the same way.

We derived the concept of empathy from a service quality and service experience lens which emphasizes that empathy is an essential behavioral and emotional attribute that service providers portray (Parasumaran *et al.* 1988, 1991; Wieseke *et al.* 2012). In the higher education context, it is recognized that empathy for students is an emotive concept that impacts teaching quality since students are deemed as delicate individuals who should be sensitively managed (Ramsden 1991; Yeo 2008). Hence, to measure the role of empathy from a dyadic view we follow the logic that: 1) empathy influences the student service experience of learning; 2) academic and administrative staff empathy is convey empathy in their service delivery; 3) both cognitive and affective aspects of empathy influence the experience in the higher education service context.

Measures of cognitive aspects of empathy as an antecedent of the service experience include ‘knowing what the needs of students are’, ‘have the students’ best interests at heart’ and ‘convenient operating hours’ (Parasumaran *et al.*, 1988). Further, affective aspects of empathy include ‘expressing genuine care and concern’ (Douglas *et al.*, 2006; Parasumaran *et al.*, 1988), ‘showing respect for the feelings, concerns and opinions of students’ (Douglas *et al.*, 2006), and ‘feel individualized attention they receive from the faculty in the learning process (Min *et al.*, 2012; Parasumaran *et al.*, 1988). We adopt a dyadic approach to understand the role of empathy and explore whether there are different perceptions between student and staff perception of empathy levels and the value of these towards student’s experiences. Our proposed hypotheses may be formalized into the conceptual model shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Conceptual model illustrating influence of empathy and student experience in learning



Methodology

Research Setting

We use the context of higher education service providers that are increasingly pressured through a demand-driven system, where student's evaluations and ranking influence the universities' brand, and where financial resources are in decline (Conduit et al., 2016). This study captures the perceptions that students and staff of higher education service providers—both teaching and administrative staff—have concerning the influence that empathy has on quality student experiences in learning; hence, providing the opportunity to understand the dyad perspectives on the role of empathy between students and staff. The study is set against the backdrop of the higher education service sector in Singapore, providing an Asian cultural context for the analysis and interpretation of data.

Survey Design

This research followed a quantitative survey design approach for data collection to explore the impact of empathy on student experience in learning with a dyadic perspective. Since the objective of the research was to study the perceptions of two major actors of higher education in a dyad, comprising students and staff members, separate questionnaires were developed for

the two dyadic actors, each worded differently to aid understanding by the respondents. The survey instruments were developed based on a review of the literature to identify the variables used for the measurement of empathy and student experience in learning. Six independent variables were identified from the literature, providing a multidimensional perspective of empathy (Douglas *et al.* 2006; Min *et al.* 2012; Parasumaran *et al.* 1988).

Variables for the concept of empathy were measured with the following six scales: (1) Staff members show respect for the feelings, concerns, and opinions of students, (2) Staff members have the students' best interests at heart, (3) Staff members know what the needs of students are, (4) Operating hours of student resources are convenient for students, (5) Staff members are friendly and caring, and (6) Students are provided individualized attention in the learning process. While student experience in learning may be a multidimensional construct with a variation of perspectives towards its measurement, we understood from the review of literature that the measurement of student experience tends to be holistic and gestalt with focus on the self (Chen and Chen, 2010). Hence, we chose to measure the student experience in learning as the dependent variable in this study with a single variable "feeling of enjoyment with the education experience" which was derived from studies conducted by de Rojas and Camarero (2008), Kao *et al.* (2008), Mano and Oliver (1993) and Otto and Ritchie (1995).

All variables were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale, with response categories from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. A 7-point Likert-scale was adopted since it provides sufficient discriminating power for responses, and yet does not provide too many response alternatives that might otherwise introduce an element of random responding that reduces the validity of responses (Preston and Colman, 2000; Weng, 2004). Also, response bias is managed with the provision of a neutral position to allow ambivalent respondents to legitimately adopt a neutral position and not be forced to select a response that they do not perceive (Clark and Watson, 1995; Rattray and Jones, 2007). We also justify the use of the

Likert scale since the study measures opinions on the strength of an experience as stated in the questionnaire items (Rattray and Jones, 2007).

It is acknowledged that the use of single-item measures in this study presents a limitation on scale reliability as compared to the use of multi-item measures (Rattray and Jones, 2007). However, it is also possible for single-item measures (i) to show meaningful reliability estimates, (ii) to contain more face validity and (iii) to be more flexible than multi-item scales (Dalbert *et al.*, 1987; Loo, 2002; Nagy, 2002). Furthermore, the six single-item measures of empathy reflect a homogenous construct which has a high internal consistency (coefficient alpha = 0.93), qualifying support for the use of single-item measures in this study (Loo, 2002). The high internal reliability estimate also justifies validity of the measures. To enhance validity of the survey instrument, expert validation was performed with experts in the higher education service sector to obtain feedback for refinement of the questionnaire.

Sampling and Data Collection

To maximize the response rate, the survey was administered as an online self-administered questionnaire. The survey was conducted using a purposive sampling approach due to ease of accessibility of the main researcher to the participants, and the unavailability of a complete list of the population of participants. The dependence of data collection on the need to utilize opportunities that present themselves renders the use of purposive sampling justifiable (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Grace *et al.*, 2012). Invitations to students, which include diploma students, undergraduates and postgraduates, were made through social media platform, Facebook; whereas invitations to staff members from a variety of faculties—for example, Engineering, Design, Business, Science, Humanities and Social Sciences—were made through direct email, using their email addresses available in the websites of their higher education

institutions. Both students and staff members were recruited from the public higher education institutions in Singapore which include five Polytechnics and six Autonomous Universities. In both modes of invitations, a hypertext link was provided to direct the participants to the online survey.

A total of 166 students and 185 staff members of higher education institutions responded to the survey. Of these, responses from 141 students and 115 staff members were usable. Of the 115 staff members, 89 were teaching staff, while 26 were non-teaching staff. To minimize common-method bias during the data collection phase, the questions asked in the survey were randomized.

Results

The Respondents

Responses from the online survey were received from student and staff member respondents with a generalized demographic profile, comprising gender, age and institution type. The decision to collect such demographic information from respondents was to enable us to provide a generalized view of the results and discussion when examining the differences in perceptions between students and staff members. We used the Singaporean higher education system as the sampling space for our study. Singapore represents a higher education system that is a blend of Eastern and Western philosophies (Marginson, 2011), hence the Singaporean context represents a synthesized discussion of higher education policies and practices with both Western Socratic and Eastern Confucian models and paradigms of education and higher education. The delimitation of this study to the Singaporean context also allows controlling the impact that the macro-environment diversity of various countries might have on the data collection and analysis for the study.

Overall, there was relative balance in respondents in terms of the function of actors (with 55.1% students and 44.9% staff members), and gender (with 53.1% male and 46.9% female for the student category; and 59.1% male and 40.9% female for the staff member category). A majority of student respondents (94%) were age 21 and below, while the age profile of staff member respondents was relatively uniform between ages 31 to 60. The detailed demographic profile of the sample frame is provided in table 1.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

| Demographics | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| <u>Function of Actor</u> | | |
| Students | 141 | 55.1% |
| Staff members (teaching) | 89 | 34.8% |
| Staff members (non-teaching) | 26 | 10.1% |
| Total | 256 | 100.0% |
| <u>Gender</u> | | |
| Students: | | |
| Male | 75 | 53.2% |
| Female | 66 | 46.8% |
| Total | 141 | 100.0% |
| Staff members: | | |
| Male | 68 | 59.1% |
| Female | 47 | 40.9% |
| Total | 115 | 100.0% |
| <u>Age</u> | | |
| Students: | | |
| Under 21 | 133 | 94.0% |
| 21 to 30 | 7 | 5.0% |
| 31 to 40 | 1 | 1.0% |
| Total | 141 | 100.0% |
| Staff members: | | |
| 21 to 30 | 7 | 6.1% |
| 31 to 40 | 45 | 39.1% |
| 41 to 50 | 32 | 27.8% |
| 51 to 60 | 27 | 23.5% |
| Above 60 | 4 | 3.5% |
| Total | 115 | 100.0% |
| <u>Institution Type</u> | | |
| For students: | | |
| Polytechnic | 130 | 92.2% |
| University | 11 | 7.8% |
| Total | 141 | 100.0% |
| For staff members: | | |
| University | 49 | 42.6% |
| Polytechnic | 66 | 57.4% |
| Total | 115 | 100.0% |

The aim of this study is to understand similarities and differences in perceptions of empathy in service, particularly within the dyad relationship between students and staff members. Specifically, the objective is to examine the influence of empathy on the student service experience. To achieve this, a multi-method approach was used. Both MANOVA and discriminant analysis are used to ascertain whether differences exist, whereas multiple regression analysis is used to ascertain what the differences are. SPSS is used to perform the analyses. Adopting a multi-method approach in data exploration and analysis of the same phenomenon—which in this case refers to the impact that empathy has on the quality of the student experience in learning—is necessary to provide for triangulation of results which provides a validation of results derived from multiple methods of analysis (Duque and Weeks, 2010; Kent, 2015).

Differences in Perception – Staff and Students

MANOVA which was used to test for differences in responses between students and staff members in a single analysis showed that there were significant differences in perceptions between the two stakeholder groups. All four multivariate statistical measures from the MANOVA, namely Roy's greatest root criterion (Θ), Wilks' lambda (Λ), Pillai's criterion (V) and Hotelling's T^2 , show p-values less than 0.05, implying that differences in perceptions exist at 5% level of significance. The results of MANOVA are presented in table 2.

Table 2: Results of MANOVA for comparison of student and staff

| | Value | F-value | Hypothesis df | Error df | p-value |
|----------------------------------|-------|---------|---------------|----------|---------|
| Pillai's trace (V) | 0.219 | 9.914 | 7.000 | 248.000 | 0.000 |
| Wilks' lambda (Λ) | 0.781 | 9.914 | 7.000 | 248.000 | 0.000 |
| Hotelling's T^2 | 0.280 | 9.914 | 7.000 | 248.000 | 0.000 |
| Roy's greatest root (Θ) | 0.280 | 9.914 | 7.000 | 248.000 | 0.000 |

Discriminant analysis which was used to identify group differences (Sherry, 2006), showed statistically significant differentiating responses between students and staff members through a test of statistical significance of discriminant function using the Wilks's lambda statistic (with p-value less than 0.05) as show in table 3. Also, as explained in table 4, the group centroids for students and staff members are extremely far apart; hence further amplifying the distinctly different perceptions between students and staff members.

Table 3: Test of Statistical Significance of Discriminant Functions

| Test of Function(s) | Wilks' Lambda | Chi-square | df | p-value |
|---------------------|---------------|------------|----|---------|
| 1 | 0.781 | 61.804 | 7 | 0.000 |

Table 4: Functions at Group Centroids

| Group | Function 1 |
|---------------|------------|
| Students | -0.476 |
| Staff members | 0.583 |

Since significant group differences were identified between students and staff members, and to control for the effects of gender and age, we proceeded to employ hierarchical multiple regression analysis to identify and explain where the differences were. Separate hierarchical regression models for students and staff members were developed and analyzed. The use of hierarchical regression analysis allowed us to investigate the effects of control variables in this study, and to minimize its effects on the dependent variable (Jaccard and Turrissi, 2003). Within each hierarchical regression analysis for students and staff members, two models were generated for analysis. The first model (Model 1) analyzes the effect of the control variables—gender and age—on quality of student experience in learning as the dependent variable; whereas, the second model (Model 2) analyzes the effect of all six empathy variables—considering the impact of the control variables—on the dependent variable.

Quality of Learning Experience

For both hierarchical regression analysis, the impact of gender and age on quality of experience in learning (as the dependent variable) was insignificant, since the contribution of these two control variables to the total variation of the dependent variable was under 1%. As illustrated in table 5, the R-Square values of Model 1 for students and staff members are 0.009 and 0.011 respectively. The table also shows Model 2 as significant for both students and staff members since the p-value is very low at 5% level of significance.

Table 5: Model fit of hierarchical regression models

| | | R | R-Square | R-Square Change | Level of Significance (p-value) |
|---------------|---------|----------|-----------------|------------------------|--|
| Student | Model 1 | 0.093 | 0.009 | 0.009 | 0.548 |
| | Model 2 | 0.781 | 0.610 | 0.601 | 0.000 |
| Staff members | Model 1 | 0.106 | 0.011 | 0.011 | 0.529 |
| | Model 2 | 0.617 | 0.381 | 0.369 | 0.000 |

With the significance of Model 2, we performed analysis of variance (ANOVA) for Model 2 of both students and staff members. The analysis, which is presented in table 6, confirms the significance of the independent empathy variables in predicting the dependent variable at 5% level of significance. Hence, through the analysis provided in table 5 and 6, it is possible to conclude that empathy matters to both students and staff members in terms of its influence the overall student experience (**H1**).

Table 6: ANOVA for test of significance for the regression model

| Model | Measure | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Level of Significance (p-value) |
|---------------|------------|----------------|-----|-------------|--------|---------------------------------|
| Student | Regression | 133.130 | 8 | 16.641 | 25.754 | 0.000 |
| | Residual | 85.295 | 132 | 0.646 | | |
| | Total | 218.426 | 140 | | | |
| Staff members | Regression | 53.048 | 8 | 6.631 | 8.140 | 0.000 |
| | Residual | 86.344 | 106 | 0.815 | | |
| | Total | 139.391 | 114 | | | |

The regression model for student and staff members is presented in table 7 and table 8 respectively. As the variance inflation factors (VIFs) for each independent variable is less than the threshold value of 10, the effects of multicollinearity are insignificant and may be ignored (Hair *et al.*, 2010). In contrasting the regression models for both student and staff members, both similarities and differences are identifiable.

One significant similarity between both the models for student and staff concerns the positive influence that the provision of individualized attention to students has on the student experience in learning. Regarding the regression model for students (table 7), the coefficient of regression value of 0.423 (p-value = 0.000) represents a strong positive significant relationship between the two variables. As for the regression model for staff members (table 8), while the relationship between the same two variables is also significant, the coefficient of regression value of 0.256 (p-value = 0.022) represents a weaker positive relationship as compared to the same relationship between the two variables for students.

Three distinct differences are identifiable between both regression models. For staff members, a marginally significant positive relationship (i.e., p-value = 0.062) is perceived between the predictor variable “knowledge of students’ needs” and the dependent variable; whereas the same relationship is not significant to students. Also, while a non-significant positive relationship exists for students between the predictor variable “having the students’ best interests at heart” and the dependent variable, a non-significant negative relationship

applies to the staff member model. Lastly, while students perceive a non-significant negative relationship between the predictor variable “friendly and caring staff members” and the dependent variable, staff members perceive a non-significant positive relationship between the same two variables.

Clearly, there are more differences than similarities between students and staff members concerning the perception of the influence of empathy on student experience in learning. The differences are summarized in table 9. However, it is possible to conclude that there are similarities and differences in perceptions between students and staff members in relations to how empathy influences student experiences in learning (**H2**).

Table 7: Regression model for students

| | Coefficient | Standard error | t-statistic | Level of Significance (p-value) | VIF |
|---|--------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--|------------|
| (Constant) | 853.802 | 1390.345 | 0.614 | 0.540 | |
| Show of respect for students by staff members | 0.029 | 0.101 | 0.287 | 0.775 | 3.451 |
| Having the students’ best interests at heart | 0.196 | 0.122 | 1.609 | 0.110 | 5.330 |
| Knowledge of students’ needs | 0.174 | 0.118 | 1.471 | 0.144 | 4.132 |
| Convenience of operating hours of student resources | 0.096 | 0.083 | 1.158 | 0.249 | 2.330 |
| Friendly and caring staff members | -0.004 | 0.112 | -0.032 | 0.974 | 3.351 |
| Provision of individualized attention to students in the learning process | 0.423 | 0.111 | 3.816 | 0.000 | 3.435 |

Table 8: Regression model for staff members

| | Coefficient | Standard error | t-statistic | Level of Significance (p-value) | VIF |
|------------|--------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|--|------------|
| (Constant) | 1422.588 | 1859.182 | 0.765 | 0.446 | |

| | Coefficient | Standard error | t-statistic | Level of Significance (p-value) | VIF |
|---|-------------|----------------|-------------|---------------------------------|-------|
| Show of respect for students by staff members | 0.174 | 0.176 | 0.991 | 0.324 | 4.130 |
| Having the students' best interests at heart | -0.182 | 0.148 | -1.230 | 0.221 | 3.918 |
| Knowledge of students' needs | 0.236 | 0.125 | 1.886 | 0.062 | 2.215 |
| Convenience of operating hours of student resources | 0.110 | 0.099 | 1.118 | 0.266 | 2.109 |
| Friendly and caring staff members | 0.145 | 0.165 | 0.880 | 0.381 | 3.499 |
| Provision of individualized attention to students in the learning process | 0.256 | 0.110 | 2.333 | 0.022 | 2.257 |

Table 9: Summary of differences between students and staff members concerning empathy factor relationship with student experience in learning

| Factor | Students | Staff members |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Knowledge of students' needs | Non-significant positive | Marginal positive significant |
| Students' best interest | Non-significant positive | Non-significant negative |
| Friendly and caring staff members | Non-significant negative | Non-significant positive |

In multiple regression, the statistical power is limited for samples sizes under 30 (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Since there were only 26 non-teaching staff respondents, it was not feasible to develop a multiple regression model to study the relationship between the six empathy variables and the single student learning experience variable. Hence, in this research, it was not possible to compare multiple regression models between teaching and non-teaching staff to investigate where differences might be between these two actors in terms of their perceptions of how empathy affects student learning experience. A MANOVA was used to analyze if differences or similarities exist between teaching and non-teaching staff. From the analysis in table 10, the p-value for all four multivariate statistical measures of the MANOVA is greater than 0.05. This implies that at 5% level of significance, there is no statistical difference in perceptions

between teaching and non-teaching staff members in relations to how empathy influences student experiences in learning (**H3**).

Table 10: Results of MANOVA for comparison of staff and non-teaching staff

| | Value | F-value | Hypothesis df | Error df | p-value |
|----------------------------------|-------|---------|---------------|----------|---------|
| Pillai's trace (V) | 0.105 | 1.786 | 7.000 | 107.000 | 0.097 |
| Wilks' lambda (Λ) | 0.895 | 1.786 | 7.000 | 107.000 | 0.097 |
| Hotelling's T^2 | 0.117 | 1.786 | 7.000 | 107.000 | 0.097 |
| Roy's greatest root (Θ) | 0.117 | 1.786 | 7.000 | 107.000 | 0.097 |

Discussion

The Role of Empathy in the Higher Education Service Context

The support of all three hypotheses (H1, H2 and H3) through the results presents arguments that support, contradict and contribute to existential research in the extant literature. Next, we discuss the implications of the results for H1 and H2. H1 supports the idea that empathy: (i) is important to students and staff members who are recognized as major actors involved with the higher education service experience, and (ii) is crucial for value co-creation through the student service experience in learning (Ladhari, 2009). Since the student experience in learning is a co-creation of experiences between students and staff, empathy serves as a key contributor to the co-creation of learning experiences in the higher education service experience. Hence, the non-falsification of H1 supports the philosophies of service-dominant logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Vargo *et al.*, 2016) through the importance of co-creation in building empathy. Furthermore, our results also explain that empathy may create the linkage between students and staff members, fostering the co-creation of learning experiences in the higher education service context. In addition, the results emphasize that empathy could serve

as a connectedness mechanism towards establishing high quality relationships between students and staff members (Pavlovich and Krahne, 2012).

Second, we confirm that the study of possible dyadic perceptions between students and staff members concerning the role of empathy in influencing student experiences in higher education service is relevant (H2). The support for H2 provides deeper understanding of similar and differing views between students and staff members concerning the role of empathy in the higher education service context. While empathy has been noted to be important to both key actors in the higher education service environment, there are also differences in the interpretation of how empathy should be manifested during the higher education service encounter. Such differences may explain how empathy varies with social context and its contribution to the student service experience in that context; thus, affirming the psycho-social characteristic of empathy (Singer and Lamm, 2009).

The Role of Empathy and the Provision of Individualized Attention

Our results reveal that the provision of individualized attention to students is a key aspect of empathy. Results clearly show the similarity between the regression models of both students and staff members perceptions. The lower magnitude of the regression coefficient—but nonetheless significant—for ‘provision of individualized attention to students in the learning process’ for staff members, may be attributed to the expectation among staff members that students be active co-creators of the learning experience; and the learning experience is a key co-created service experience that students encounter in the higher education service encounter (Ng and Forbes, 2009). Nonetheless, the agreement between students and staff members concerning the provision of individualized attention as a form of empathy to students might be due to the popularity of a student-centered approach as a model of service quality in

the higher education service (Clewes, 2003). The idea of provision of individualized attention, and customer-centricity, is not peculiar to service management (Mickelsson, 2013). While higher education is increasingly being marketed as a ‘product’, the provision of education is one form of social services and it is still popularly perceived as both a social and public good in the eyes of its customers, i.e. students (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Tilak, 2008). Hence, higher education services when viewed as a social and public good needs individualization as a “necessary response to the increased differentiation and flexibility of social, cultural and economic life” (Borghi and Berkel, 2007, p. 414) of the student.

Importantly, however, results also highlighted three differences between the of students and staff members’ regression models (Table 9). These differences concern the predictor variables ‘knowledge of students’ needs’, ‘having the students’ best interests at heart’, and ‘friendly and caring staff members’, and their influence on student experience in learning. Staff members perceive knowing what students’ needs are as more important than students do themselves. The ‘customer-centric’, hence customer-dominant logic view of service, that has been ingrained in the service-providing mindset of service providers and customer service researchers (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010; Mickelsson, 2013) might be the reason for this difference in importance placed on knowledge of student needs. However, such a perspective fails to acknowledge that customers care more about the hedonic and affective aspects of the service experience than the intellectual-cognitive customer processes that service providers tend to focus on in service delivery (Chang and Horng, 2010; Mickelsson, 2013). Students might perceive subject-matter content knowledge is less important than the “care” aspects of service provision in higher education. This argument would be congruent with the idea, as discussed earlier, that a student’s overall assessment of the student experience tends to be rather a holistic gestalt - than attribute-based or utilitarian in nature (Chen and Chen, 2010).

Different Perspectives of Students and Staff

For our third hypothesis (H3) we proposed: ‘Teaching and non-teaching staff perceive the impact of empathy on student learning experiences in the same way’. Our findings support that in some aspects of empathy students and staff have diverging views on empathy. For example, students’ perceptions lead to positive service evaluation when students perceive that staff members act in the student’s best interest. In contrast, staff members perceive care and concern for students is essential for student’s positive evaluation. This opposing perspective between students and staff members concerning the treatment of students’ best interests in their learning experience may have implications for an increasing sense of entitlement—due to a burgeoning perspective that students be treated as customers—that students have towards learning in higher education (Finney and Finney, 2010; Pitman, 2016; Yeo, 2009).

The rationale for the contrasting views might be explained with the strong ingraining of a goods-dominant (G-D) logic among students, and a service-dominant (S-D) logic among education staff members. From a student’s perspective, a G-D logic might emphasize commoditization of the students experience in learning. Thus, the experience might be about the outcome. Whereas, the central argument for staff might be that value in a student learning experience is based on co-creation in accordance with S-D logic (Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Vargo *et al.*, 2016). The co-creation of value within the higher education service context predominantly involves both students and staff members.

The difference in perceptions concerning students’ best interests may also indicate the strong resistance that staff members— who associate advancing students’ best interests with ‘pleasing’—have towards over-emphasizing operational aspects of managing education and which might create a sense of entitlement among students (Lowrie and Willmott, 2009). However, students acknowledge the importance of staff members exhibiting students’ best interests at heart, due to a perceived value about ‘best interests’ (Gallarza *et al.*, 2011). Value

is best understood from the lens of the student (as customer) based on the value in use during the education service experience (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2005). Also, value creation requires the experience of empathy towards customer (Gigson-Odgers, 2008), hence the interpretation of empathy in terms of best interest by students.

Another contradiction concerns staff members' perception that friendliness and show of care to students positively influence student experience; whereas, students do not perceive this in the same way. From the students' perspective, it might be an indication that they would prefer a relationship that is rather based on professional work values driven by meaningful work practices with empathy (Fagermoen, 1997); whereas an overly friendly and caring staff member might be perceived as being non-authentic and untrusting in the service approach and delivery (Featherman *et al.*, 2006; Yagil, 2014). The idea of authenticity towards students might be explained from the lens of authentic leadership, in which authentic leaders are defined as those who lead in accordance with the true self, governed by self-awareness and self-regulation (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008).

Hence, showing too much care might appear to be artificial in the service relationship that staff members have with students. The finding also goes against mainstream education literature, which tends to support the positive impact that care and friendliness have on student learning experiences (Mazer *et al.*, 2007). Hofstede's power distance cultural dimension (Bochner and Hesketh, 1994; Hofstede, 2011) may be used to explain the discrepancy. As the research was conducted in the context of the Singaporean higher education system which has a modernized Confucian culture with a strong sense of superior-subordinate relationship between students and staff members (Marginson, 2011), it is unsurprising that staff members (as superior) may hold a sense of duty towards providing care and concern towards students (as subordinates); whereas, students may not expect such reciprocity.

Finally, the non-falsification of H3, might explain a common work-related value—with regards to the exhibition of empathy through the student experience in learning—that both teaching and non-teaching staff members hold in the delivery of higher education service to students. Such work-related value may be derived from the regression model in table 8, which is applicable to both categories of staff members. Education service providers perceive knowledge of students' needs and provision of individualized attention as essential to positively influence the student service experience in learning. Interestingly, these service providers do not perceive having students' best interest at heart as a positive. The phenomenon might also be explained using Hofstede's power distance cultural dimension in relations to the working context of a modernized Confucian higher education operating model which values the higher education service provider to be in a control and command position.

In conclusion, there are more differences between students and staff members than similarities with regards to how empathy is perceived to influence the student experience in the higher education service context. From the discussions, it is clear that a combination of intellectual-cognitive and affective aspects of empathy have an influence on the student experience in learning in a higher education service. Affective aspects of empathy are emphasized by both students and staff member, with prosocial inclinations (Decety and Lamm, 2006).

Implications and Directions for Future Research

Our results suggest that empathy plays a key role in the service experiences of students. However, although both staff and students perceive this importance, views on underlying elements of empathy vary. From these results, a number of implications and directions for future research arise.

Practical Implications

Education providers—management, administrative staff and educators alike—need to better understand empathy in relation to customer value and experience management. Our data has shown that providing individualized attention to students is a key element—both from the student and staff perspectives—for the student service experience in a higher education context. Importantly, however, students do not expect care and concern from staff members since too much care and concern may create problems of ‘over-servicing’, which often manifests as spoon-feeding (Raelin, 2009). Spoon-feeding has been criticized, as it hinders students learning and critical thinking— and possibly impact employability and professional skills development (Dehler and Welsh, 2014). Service providers co-create the student experience and are key influencers in the student’s career and professional development. These customers, i.e., students, want individualized and professionalized attention, and to be taken seriously. From knowing this, practical implications arise for educators, administrators, and managers. Empathy within student experiences means that the relationship between staff and students is based on respect and professionalism rather than a caring and affective relationship. Whereas staff might perceive that good ‘knowledge of students’ needs’ might be a generalized class-cohort understanding—our results suggest this needs evaluation should be made on an individual basis.

Practical implications also arise from knowing that there are differences in understanding empathy between students and staff. Above all, knowing about and learning what constitutes and matters in the student service experience, specifically relating to the role of empathy, should be integrated into services training and teacher education. Much like any motor ability, the extant literature has shown that empathy and compassion can be trained, and staff experience training benefits higher levels of tolerance, personal well-being,

increased levels of cooperation and trust, and tolerance (Chierchia and Singer, 2017). At this stage, however, one limitation of high levels of empathy needs to be noted. High levels of empathy might not lead to subsequent behavioral changes: “empathy enables us to connect with one another at an emotional level. However, this might not be enough to promote pro-social behavior. For instance, it has often been argued that empathically suffering with others does not necessarily motivate us to help them, neither conceptually nor empirically” (Chierchia and Singer 2017, p. 247).

Theoretical Implications and Future Research

This research was conducted to respond to Ostrom et al.’s calls (2015) for further research in understanding how to enhance the service experience in various industries. To expand on the knowledge in this paper, future research could explore perceptions of empathy in different cultural or services contexts, to determine how culturally bound the results are. Furthermore, in an educational context, it would be useful to understand how different educational contexts outside of Singapore influence the role of empathy. Further, researchers could adopt qualitative, interpretative research methods to explore deeper underlying themes around empathy, for example, how relationships between staff and peer, or past experiences, influence customer value in relations to changed actor behavior.

Importantly, our results have shown that higher education providers’ over-servicing and spoon-feeding, and students receiving ‘too much care and concern’ can have a detrimental influence on the student service experience. ‘Over-servicing’ may hinder the co-creation of the service experience. For an educational service practice perspective, not ‘over-servicing’ might refer to professional individualized attention that comprises knowing student’s names in the classroom, responding to individual student’s emails, while remaining a professional and not engaged in a ‘caring’ relationship. Hence, we also recommend future research

direction around the potential issue with ‘over-servicing’ in higher education service. Future research might also explore how to optimally balance co-creation and without generating too much involvement, work overload, and declining independence and freedom among staff members. So far, only limited research has explored the idea of ‘over-servicing’ and its implications on service outcomes, and the after-effects of co-creation. We propose further research directions in these areas.

Summary

In summary, this study examines the role that empathy plays with the student service experience in the higher education service context. The potential service phenomenon of ‘over-servicing’ of students with detrimental effects, and the differences in perceptions between students and staff highlight the complex nature of empathy and provide a foundation for further research as discussed in this paper.

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